Public Relations: A Planned Program
The Dentist and His Professional Image

What is my professional image? How does what I do affect it? For many years, the concepts of public and professional relations and the image of the dentist have been somewhat in the background.

Within the past ten years, there has been an increased awareness by the dental profession of the image of the dentist. The following data were obtained from a recent survey:

78% of the dentists surveyed believed that the dental profession is not providing adequate dental education for patients.

51% felt that they themselves were devoting insufficient attention to instruction of patients.

72% felt that crowded scheduling was a major deterrent to devoting more of their office time to education of patients.

Other reasons most commonly cited were resistance to dental education by patients (36%), patients incapable of understanding instruction (25%), and lack of compensation for time spent on instruction (7%).

The dental profession and the primary and the secondary schools were considered to be about equally responsible for future improvements in patient dental education. Although 65% felt that the schools should be doing more, 69% believed that the profession should also be doing more. Preventive dentistry was used by 15% of the dentists in the area most in need of greater educational support. Increased use of television, magazines, and newspapers as popular education media was recommended by a great majority of the doctors. They all agreed that more emphasis should be placed on the total treatment plan instead of piece-meal dentistry.

It has been recommended that the public image of the dentist would be further improved if more and more dentists would participate in extra-professional and community activities. For too many years, the dentist has been self-enclosed in his treatment room, hardly ever leaving his professional suite but to go home. It is only recently that more and more doctors of dentistry are getting out of their offices and attending hospitals, dental schools, medical schools, out-patient clinics, and liberal arts colleges, to participate in research, patient service, or academic instruction.

There is evidence to point to dentists as more community-minded. Some are involved in local school boards, community welfare, and charitable organizations and their fund raising drives. The public at large realized that a dentist is interested in the prevention and treatment of the oral health problems and in socio-economic problems as well.

On January 17th-20th, 1965, the Committee on Social Characteristics of the American College of Dentists put on a workshop on the "Image of Dentistry". Here are a few notes from the papers read.

"The dentist's image of his profession can only be improved if he is willing and proud to be identified with it."

"The dentist who regards his practice primarily as a means of making a living has lost the true meaning of his work and perhaps, the true meaning of his life."

"It is difficult to talk about the 'image' of any country without an aware-

ness that it is but a part of the total image of a complex national society. In the United States, as in other countries, the dental profession obtains some of the shadings and contours of its own image directly from the nation of which it is part. Dentistry in the United States has been influenced and formed by the ideals and goals of the nation it serves. These ideals and goals alter as the nation and the world change according to the circumstances of peace, or war, want or plenty and the rising standards of living for all citizens. . . . The dental profession in the United States participated actively in attempting to satisfy these 'new expectations' (of its citizens) by devoting its resources to raising the standard of total health for all citizens through programs for better dental health.

The profession has a permanent commitment to the principle that 'dental care should be available to all regardless of income or geographic location'."

"The profession's fight for the fluoridation of public water supplies has enhanced its public image by convincing many people of the profession's objective to advance dental health, even at possible economic risk to itself. The failure of some dentists to identify themselves publicly with this program has caused the dimming of the image in some areas because of the implied disinterest when there was a clear call for effort and courage in public and professional issue."

"Dental teaching and research staff must be of quality comparable to that of medicine in order to reach and maintain a competitive position in the University. This means comparable salaries, equipment, space and fringe benefits. Given these things, it follows that a fair share of the better students will be attracted to dentistry."

Dentistry needs improved college education as a basis for dental student admission, better education in dental schools, and the ability of dentists to function as members of the health team in the hospital and the community. One way may be by developing a stronger, more thoroughly prepared dental teacher.

What dentistry needs are teachers who know how to analyze a problem, gather correct data accurately, recognize error, quantitate results and come to conclusions. In other words, teachers need to know the research process and how to present results in clearly understandable English.

It is by continuous lifting of ideals that the dentist, as a dedicated and unselfish friend, will maintain his rightful place in the eyes of society.

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